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THE TERCENTENARY OF "DON QUIXOTE."

BY HAVELOCK ELLIS.

I.

THREE centuries ago there appeared in Madrid a novel entitled "Don Quixote de la Mancha." The book was carelessly printed in poor type on bad paper. It aroused little admiration; most of the great literary men of the age looked down on it contemptuously; it seemed, indeed, to satirize some of the most sacred ideals of serious Spaniards. But however it might be regarded by orthodox literary critics or narrow-minded patriots, the book was at once read throughout Spain. Outside Spain, also, it was very soon not only known and translated, but highly praised, especially in England, where leading men of letters, great philosophers, and eminent physicians proclaimed their admiration. More happy than its hero or its author, the novel had set forth on a career of adventure in which it finally conquered the world.

There can be no doubt about it, "Don Quixote" is the world's greatest and most typical novel. There are other novels which are finer works of art, more exquisite in style, of more perfect architectonic plan. But such books appeal less to the world at large than to the literary critic; they are not equally amusing, equally profound, to the men of all nations and all ages and all degrees of mental capacity. Even if we put aside monuments of literary perfection, like some of the novels of Flaubert, and consider only the great European novels of widest appeal and deepest influence, they still fall short of the standard which this book, their predecessor and often their model, had set. "Tristram Shandy," perhaps the most cosmopolitan of English novels, a book that in humor and wisdom often approaches "Don Quixote," has not the same universality of appeal. "Robinson

Crusoe," the most typical of English novels, the Odyssey of the Anglo-Saxon on his mission of colonizing the earth—God-fearing, practical, inventive—is equally fascinating to the simplest intellect and the deepest. Yet, wide as its reputation is, it has not the splendid affluence, the universal humanity, of "Don Quixote." "Tom Jones," always a great English novel, can never become a great European novel; while the genius of Scott, which was truly cosmopolitan in its significance and its influence, was not only too literary in its inspirations, but too widely diffused over a wilderness of romances, ever to achieve immortality. "*La Nouvelle Héloïse*," which once swept across Europe and renewed the novel, was too narrow in its spirit, too temporary in its fashion, to be enduring. "Wilhelm Meister," perhaps the wisest and profoundest of books in novel form, challenges a certain comparison; as the romance of the man who, like Saul the son of Kish, went forth to seek his father's asses and found a kingdom, it narrates an adventure which is in some sense the reverse of Don Quixote's; but in its fictional form it presents, like the books of Rabelais, far too much that is outside the scope of fiction ever to appeal to all tastes. "The Arabian Nights," which alone surpasses "Don Quixote" in variety and universality of interest, is not a novel by one hand but a whole literature. "Don Quixote" remains the one great typical novel. It is a genuine invention; for it combined for the first time the old chivalrous stories of heroic achievement with the new picaresque stories of vulgar adventure, creating in the combination something that was altogether new, an instrument that was capable of touching life at every point. It leads us into an atmosphere in which the ideal and the real are equally at home. It blends together the gravest and the gayest things in the world. It penetrates to the harmony that underlies the violent contrasts of life, the only harmony which in our moments of finest insight we feel to be possible, in the same manner and, indeed, at the same moment,—for "Lear" appeared in the same year as "Don Quixote,"—that Shakespeare brought together the madman and the fool on the heath in a concord of divine humor. It is a story-book that a child may enjoy, a tragicomedy that only the wisest can fully understand. It has inspired many of the masterpieces of literature; it has entered into the lives of the people of every civilized land; it has become a part of our human civilization.

II.

It was not to be expected that the author of such a book as this, the supreme European novel, an adventure book of universal human interest, should be a typical man of letters, shut up in a study, like Scott or Balzac or Zola. Cervantes was a man of letters by accident. First of all, he was a soldier and an adventurer; it was as such that he impressed his fellow-countrymen, and to this fact we owe much of our knowledge of his life. The records of his life—apart from his incidental notices of himself, and equally apart from his later fame as an author—are detailed, though broken and imperfect. We are even able to frame a definite portrait of the man as he lived,—here, indeed, aided by his own descriptions,—a more definite portrait than we possess of his great contemporary and spiritual kinsman, Shakespeare, though, in this more unfortunate, we have no authentic portrait of Cervantes. We see him, a man of average height, with heavy shoulders, light complexion, bright eyes, chestnut hair, great mustache and golden beard, a little marred by short sight and an impediment of speech, yet the type of the man of sanguine temperament and audacious action.

Born in 1547, probably on Michaelmas Day, in the ancient Castilian town of Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid, Cervantes was the youngest child of parents of hidalgo blood, whose position in the world had fallen. Both parents belonged to Alcalá and its neighborhood, and it is interesting to remember that scarcely more than a hundred miles away had been the home of the parents of the other great Spanish world-figure, Christopher Columbus, who gave to Spain a New World she lost so soon. Cervantes was fortunate, not only in his birth, but in his breeding; his schoolmaster was a man of firm character, as well as of learning and literary ability; he conceived an affection for his pupil, and was probably the means of implanting or arousing those tastes which were afterwards to develop so mightily. As a youth, Cervantes wrote bad verse, which perhaps helped him to secure at the age of twenty-two the friendship and patronage of Cardinal Acquaviva, a man scarcely older than himself, with whom he travelled to Rome. For some of his biographers there is a mystery about this sudden departure from Madrid; a quarrel, it has been more than surmised, an intrigue with a lady of high birth, swords drawn in the precincts of the Court,—a serious

offence for which the penalty was loss of the right hand. But, whatever the episode, it served to bring Cervantes into the main current of European life. It was, indeed, a fine moment in the history of Europe. The days of chivalry seemed to have come back again. A great Crusade had been preached against the infidel Turk, and under the inspiration of the Pope and the leadership of Don John of Austria the united forces of Rome, Spain and Venice were preparing to put to sea with an armament of unparalleled magnitude. Cervantes, with the hereditary instincts of a soldier and the personal impulse of a poet enamoured of high adventure, shared the enthusiasm. He left the Cardinal's household and enlisted as a common soldier. But the regiment he entered, which admitted only young men of good family, was one of great distinction; it represented the flower of Spanish infantry, held to be invincible, until, a century later, it went down forever at the battle of Rocroi. This wave of Christian chivalry that thus swept Cervantes with it culminated in the famous battle of Lepanto, one of the world's great sea-fights. That day—the 7th of October, 1571—was the finest moment in the life of Cervantes. He was weak and ill of a fever when the battle began, he received three gunshot wounds in the course of it, and his left hand was permanently maimed, yet his share in the glory of that day was ever afterwards a source of pride and joy. Singularly enough, as contemporary evidence amply shows, the part played by this private soldier on board the "*Marquesa*," one among thirty thousand men, really won him the highest honor. Nothing could better demonstrate the extraordinary personal qualities of the man. When, after some further service in an expedition against Tunis, he obtained leave of absence to revisit Spain, he bore with him on board the galley "*El Sol*" letters of recommendation to the King from the first generals of the day, containing the highest eulogies of his valor and merit, as well as of his amiable personal qualities. But that irony of life which was always to pursue Cervantes in the real world—aided, as he himself admitted, by peculiarities of personal temperament—and which in old age he was to translate so incomparably into the terms of the ideal world, had begun to pursue him. The "*Sol*" was captured almost in sight of Spain by Algerine corsairs, and these letters led the captors to form so high an opinion of the importance of their captive that they demanded a ransom out of

proportion to his position or his family's means. He became the slave of a corsair captain of exceptional brutality, and was carried to Algiers in chains, there to be detained for five years.

In Algiers, as again we learn from much independent evidence, Cervantes displayed, under new and more difficult circumstances, the same extraordinary personal qualities. He was a slave, in chains, the property of a brutal master. Yet he speedily became the leader and inspirer of the Christian captives in Algiers; in devising methods of escape and in boldly seeking to execute them, his courage and fertility of resource were alike inexhaustible. Owing to the treachery of others, rather than to any failure on his own part, his plans always miscarried; but he accepted the responsibility, and he would implicate no one else. It is astonishing that his captors, so far from inflicting punishment upon him, seem to have treated him with an increased degree of consideration. In Islam, human worth is always recognized and esteemed wherever it may appear; that is one of the secrets of its vitality. But the absolute impunity which Cervantes enjoyed at the hands of these reckless and daring Algerians, then at the height of their power, still remains a mystery. At last, by the exertions of a benevolent monk, the amount of the ransom was gathered together from various sources, and Cervantes returned to Spain. But his services were now forgotten; Lepanto had proved a barren victory, and Don John was dead. If Cervantes had chosen to become a renegade Mohammedan, he could, doubtless, have risen to any position he cared to aspire to; in Spain, the spirit of freedom and all personal initiative were being crushed beneath the arrogant hands of the Philips. Spain had no uses for the best and bravest of her sons, and Cervantes saw nothing before him but to do as he had done ten years before, though not, we may be sure, with the same enthusiasm: he once more entered the ranks as a common soldier. This time, again, he chose a highly distinguished regiment, in which, it so chanced, his rival and enemy, Lope de Vega—then a boy of sixteen, but soon to become the acknowledged prince of Spanish letters,—was also at this time serving. Cervantes was now, however, growing tired of the hard, ill-paid and brutal life of camps; a chivalrous enthusiasm, not the love of warfare, had led him to become a soldier; and, after fighting under Alva a victorious campaign against Portugal, he threw aside the pike for the pen.

It was a memorable epoch in his life. It seems to have been in Portugal, about this time or somewhat earlier, for the point is not quite clear, that he fell in love with a Portuguese woman, said to have been of high birth, by whom he had a natural daughter, his only child, who was with him to the end of his life; and perhaps it was on this account that he retained a constant affection for Portugal and the Portuguese. A little later, in 1584, at the age of thirty-eight, he wrote his first acknowledged work, the pastoral poem of "Galatea," and shortly afterwards married the lady for whose sake it is supposed to have been written, a woman much younger than himself, belonging to his own province, and of fairly good fortune; with her he appears to have lived happily till his death, and she desired to be buried by his side. Henceforth, his life was divided between literature, especially the writing of plays, and various petty avocations,—sometimes as a collector of dues for religious orders, sometimes as an agent for buying grain and oil for the fleet,—whereby he was enabled to become very familiar with every aspect of country life in Spain. Once he was imprisoned by the default of a man to whom he had entrusted a large sum of money. In literature, he was always a pioneer, though as yet he had written nothing that could gain for him an immortal name. At last,—if we may follow the tradition, though it is not solidly established,—by the wanton and unexplained act of some unknown person he was incarcerated for a time in the cellar of a house in the little town of Argamasilla in La Mancha. Here, it seems, suggested by some local circumstance of the moment, the germ of "Don Quixote" arose in his mind. A few years later, the first Part was published. Yet later, in 1613, appeared the "*Novelas Exemplares*," a delightful collection of stories, which, as literature, may be said in some respects to rank even above the greater work. Finally, in 1615, at the age of sixty-eight, he published the second Part of "Don Quixote." During all these years Cervantes lived with his wife, his daughter, his widowed sister and his niece, whom he supported, sometimes in Seville, sometimes in Valladolid, sometimes in Madrid, the three chief cities of a country which was at that moment the first in the world, the largest, the richest, the most civilized, the most brilliant. He died in Madrid, a popular author, but a poor and unhonored man, on April 23rd, 1616, departing from the world but a few days before his great fellow spirit, Shakespeare.

III.

It was necessary to recapitulate the main facts of the life of Cervantes,—however familiar they may be,—because it is impossible to understand “Don Quixote” unless we realize clearly the figure of the man who stands behind it. We are accustomed to say that the book is a satire of the old romances of chivalry. In a limited sense that is quite true. Cervantes ridiculed the extravagances of chivalrous romance in its decadence. But for “Amadis” and the other great old romances he had nothing but admiration and affection. They were, indeed, a characteristic product of Spain; we may even say the same of chivalry itself, for it lived on in Spain long after it had died everywhere else, fostered by the struggle against the infidel Moslem, himself a chivalrous figure, and the more or less legendary Cid is the supreme representative of chivalry. Cervantes lived his whole life in the spirit of the knight errant, and “Don Quixote” swept away the romances of chivalry, not because it was a satire of them, but because it was itself a romance of chivalry and the greatest of them all, since its action was placed in the real world.

Cervantes was only a man of letters by accident. He was a soldier, a man of action, who would never have taken up the pen, except in moments of recreation, if a long chain of misfortunes had not closed the other avenues of life. It is a singular fact that nearly every great Spanish author has been a soldier or an adventurer, at least as familiar with the pike as with the pen. “The lance has never blunted the pen, nor the pen the lance,” said Don Quixote, therein expressing the conviction of all Spanish writers. Italian men of letters have often been keen politicians, French men of letters brilliant men of the world, English and Americans good business men or capable men of affairs, but nowhere save in Spain do we find the soldier supreme in literature. To say nothing of the writers of the golden age of Spain in which Cervantes himself lived, we find the soldier prominent in Spanish literature from the first. Merobaudes, the Christian poet of the fifth century, was also a distinguished soldier; Jaime the Conqueror, the great King of Aragon, is almost as famous for his picturesque chronicle as for his fighting qualities; Bishop Roderic of Toledo, the chief chronicler of the thirteenth century, wielded his sword in the fight with the same vigor as he wielded the pen afterwards in describing the fight; Santillana, the glory

of Spanish literature in the fifteenth century, was equally great in camp, council and court; Garcilasso de la Vega, one of the most typical of Spanish figures, describes himself as dividing his time between his sword and his pen.

Spain has ever been the land of the sword; the ancient rapier, perhaps even the name itself, is Spanish; Shakespeare's soldiers cherished their Bilbo; the blades of Toledo, valued by the Romans, are still made in that ancient city. It is perhaps not surprising that, with this familiarity with the sword and the rapier, Spanish men of letters, and very notably Cervantes himself, were apt to neglect the more minute graces of style, and to wield the pen with something of the same freedom and force which they had learned from the more brilliant, virile and flexible weapon. It is, perhaps, also not surprising that they learned in the world of action to feel and to express a humanity, an insight, a depth, which are not learned in the study; it was a Spaniard who declared that the poet should speak through the mouth of his wound, "*por la boca de su herida.*" The swift, daring, poignant qualities of Spanish literature seem to bear witness to the fact that these men were trained for the pen by the sword.

In this, as in all else, Cervantes was a typical Spaniard. He was a great personality, a brilliant soldier, long before he conceived "Don Quixote." It is interesting in this respect to compare him with the greatest of his contemporaries in literature, a man as typically English as he was Spanish, and as immortal as himself. In temper of intellect, Shakespeare resembled Cervantes, though he was incomparably the greater artist; they had passed through the same kind of mental evolution, they had the same abounding humanity, and both ultimately attained the same sweet-natured, yet profoundly ironic, vision of life. Yet, if neither of them had ever written, how different, when the antiquaries had disinterred their histories, would be our conception of the two men. They were alike in being of somewhat poor parentage and yet of good family, and both had to make their own way in the world. But all we could say of Shakespeare would be that, after some rather dubious episodes in early life, he became a third-rate actor and a successful manager; that, personally, he was an amiable man, though punctilious in business matters; and that his chief ambition in life was to retire early on a competency, and to write "Gentleman" after his name. There

are millions of his fellow countrymen of whom one could say as much. But, if Cervantes had never written a line, he would still have seemed an extraordinary man and a great personality. Before he wrote of life, he had spent his best years in learning the lessons of life.

Seldom has any great novel been written by a young man: "Tristram Shandy," "Robinson Crusoe," "Tom Jones," "*La Nouvelle Héloïse*," "Wilhelm Meister" were all written by mature men who had for the most part passed middle age. "Don Quixote"—more especially the second and finer Part—was written by an old man, who had outlived his ideals and his ambitions, and settled down peacefully in a little home in Madrid, poor of purse but rich in the wisdom garnered during a variegated and adventurous life. "Don Quixote" is a spiritual autobiography. That is why it is so quintessentially a Spanish book.

Cervantes was a Spaniard of Spaniards. The great writers of a nation are not always its most typical representatives. Dante could only have been an Italian and Goethe only a German, but we do not feel that either of them is the representative man of his people. We may seek to account for Shakespeare by appealing to various racial elements in Great Britain, but Shakespeare—with his volubility and extravagance, his emotional expansiveness, his lightness of touch, his reckless gayety and wit—was far indeed from the slow, practical, serious Englishman. Cervantes, from first to last, is always Spanish. His ideals and his disillusion, his morality and his humor, his artistic methods as well as his style,—save that he took a few ideas from Italy,—are entirely Spanish. Don Quixote himself and Sancho Panza, his central personages, are not only all Spanish, they are all Spain. Often have I seen them between Madrid and Seville, when travelling along the road, skirting La Mancha, that Cervantes knew so well: the long solemn face, the grave courteous mien, the luminous eyes that seem fixed on some inner vision and blind to the facts of life around; and there also, indeed everywhere, is the round wrinkled good-humored face of the peasant farmer, imperturbably patient, meeting all the mischances and discomforts of life with a smile and a jest and a proverb. "Don Quixote!" I have always exclaimed to myself, "Sancho Panza!" They two make Spain in our day, perhaps, even more than in Cervantes's day; for, sound as Spain still is at the core, the man of heroic action and fearless

spirit, the *conquistador* type of man, is nowadays seldom seen in the land, and the great personalities of Spain tend to become the mere rhetorical ornaments of a rotten political system. Don Quixote, with his idealism, his pride of race and ancestry, his more or less dim consciousness of some hereditary mission which is out of relation to the world of to-day, is as inapt for the leadership of the modern world, as Sancho Panza, by his very virtues, his brave acceptance of the immediate duty before him, his cheerful and uncomplaining submission to all the ills of life, is inapt for the tasks of progress and reform. The genius of Cervantes has written the history of his own country.

Even in the minute details of his great book we may detect the peculiarly national character of the mind of Cervantes, and his thoroughly Spanish tastes. To mention only one trifling point, we may observe his preference for the color green, which appears in his work in so many different shapes. Perhaps the Moors, for whom green is the most sacred of colors, bequeathed this preference to the Spaniards, though in any case it is the favorite color in a dry and barren land, such as is Spain in much of its extent. Cervantes admires green eyes, like other Spanish poets, though unlike the related Sicilians, for whom dark eyes alone are beautiful; Dulcinea's eyes are "*verdes esmeraldas*." Every careful reader of "Don Quixote," familiar with Spain, cannot fail to find similar instances of Cervantes's *Españolismo*.

And yet on this intensely national basis, "Don Quixote" is the most cosmopolitan, the most universal, of books. Not Chaucer or Tolstoy shows a wider humanity. Even Shakespeare could not dispense with a villain, but there is no Iago among the six hundred and sixty-nine personages who, it is calculated, are introduced into "Don Quixote." There is no better test of a genuinely human spirit than an ability to overcome the all-pervading influences of religious and national bias. Cervantes had shed his blood in battle against the infidel corsairs of Algiers, and he had been their chained captive. Yet he not only learned and absorbed much from the Eastern life in which he had been soaked for five years, but he acquired a comprehension and appreciation of the Moor which it was rare indeed for a Spaniard to feel for the hereditary foes of his country. Between Portugal and Spain, again, there was then, to an even greater extent than to-day, a spirit of jealousy and antagonism; yet Cervantes can never say too

much in praise of Portugal and the Portuguese. If there was any nation whom Spaniards might be excused for hating at that time it was the English; those pirates and heretics of the north were perpetually swooping down on their coasts, destroying their galleons, devastating their colonial possessions; Cervantes lived through the days of the Spanish Armada; yet his attitude towards the English is always courteous and considerate.

It was, perhaps, in some measure, this tolerant and even sympathetic attitude towards the enemies of Spain, as well as what seemed to many the ridicule he had cast upon Spanish ideals and Spanish foibles, which so long stood in the way of any enthusiastic recognition by Spain of Cervantes's supreme place in literature. He was for some centuries read in Spain, as Shakespeare was at first read in England, as an amusing author, before he was recognized as one of the world's great spirits. In the meanwhile, outside Spain, "*Don Quixote*" was not only finding affectionate readers among people of all ages and all classes; it was beginning to be recognized as a wonderful and many-sided work of art, a treasure-house in which each might find what he sought; an allegory, even, which would lend itself to all interpretations. Heine has recorded how, as a boy by the Rhine, he had read "*Don Quixote*" with laughter and tears, and how with his own growth the meaning of the book grew with him, a perpetual inspiration. And it is not alone the pioneer in life, the adventurous reformer, the Knight of the Holy Ghost, who turns to "*Don Quixote*"; the prudent and sagacious man of the world turns thither also with a smile full of meaning, as the wise and sceptical Sydenham turned when an ambitious young practitioner of medicine asked him what he should read: "Read '*Don Quixote*.' It is a good book. I read it still." "*Don Quixote*" is not only the type and pattern of our greatest novels; it is a vision of the human soul, woven into the texture of the world's spiritual traditions. The Knight of La Mancha has indeed succeeded in his quest, and won a more immortal Dulcinea than he ever sought. In the festivals which she holds this month, Spain is expressing her pride in the achievement of a great Spaniard; she is also celebrating one of the immortal possessions of mankind.

HAVELOCK ELLIS.